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## Sick servants of the quill

By Anita Brookner

ROGER L. WILLIAMS: The Horror of Life 581pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £15. 0 297 77883 8

Roger Williams, Distinguished Professor in the Department of History at the University of Wyoming, has drawn together, under his Baudelairean title (but without its

important connotation: *horreur de la vie*, essays of five studies of nineteenth-century French

writers who have little in common apart from the fact that they all died of an advanced venereal infection. Professor Williams's thesis, that I understand him correctly, is

that Baudelaire, Jules de Goncourt, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant and Alphonse Daudet were unable to initiate or sustain normal sexual

relationships, had recourse to prostitutes, contracted their infection, and concealed, obfuscated, or dignified their lamentable destinies behind the guise of dedication

to the undifferentiated ideal of Art, the great nineteenth-century cult, the entity that does not exist but which they called into being as the religious surrogate, the ultimate justification of their unfulfilled lives.

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ous, their visits to various watering places, riverine establishments, or warmer climates in their search to obtain relief, their embarrassment of doctors (for they thought nothing of consulting seven or eight) and, last but by no means least, the financial burdens they were obliged to shoulder. The filiation of these themes is obvious and obscure and may even give rise to further diagnosis.

In the case of Baudelaire, Flaubert and Maupassant, the demands for or complaints about money are hysterical and obsessive and have to do with their expectations from or responsibilities towards their mothers. Mme Baudelaire is punished, financially, for having introduced her son to the horror of life, while Mme Flaubert and Maupassant effectively restrict their sons in the same way in case such sons should discover the ecstasy of life. And the need to write and to justify themselves in the light of their mothers' disappointment becomes a form of regression, pain for by a terrible simulacrum of marriage in which both mother and son collude. By the same token, the writer's mistress, usually chosen for her insubstantiality, viz Baudelaire's illiterate mistress Jeanne Duval, the Goncourts' shared Maria, a former midwife, and Maupassant's androgynous Gisèle, will serve one purpose only, but if we are to believe Professor Williams, will probably not be allowed to serve it too well. Poor Louise Colet, who wanted love and conversation and a visit to Mme Flaubert, was looking entirely in the wrong direction.

It is easy to see how rapidly these authors become case histories, and how very possible it is to treat their lives as instances of inadequately realized sexuality, or morbid affliction, and of disputed diagnosis, without at any point having to refer to their work as opposed to their tormented existence.

The pusillit is further complicated by the fact that many doctors have been fascinated by the diseases of great men, and that it has been fashionable for medical experts to write their doctoral theses on the symptoms of a dead patient whom they have never once encountered. From the bibliography I select at random the following titles: *Gli "atragas de peris" di Giotto e Flaubert: Ispirazione e epistola*; *Die psychische Mumpsassant: Ein kritischer Versuch*; and *The Illness of Baudelaire*, published in the *Urologic and Cutaneous Review* for 1934. As recently as 1960 Dr Pierre Gallet asked, "Quel diagnostic uronomeus fait si vous ayons noté deux types de cas. L'un vu un professeur de Berne, très versé dans la connaissance des langues orientales, homme encore à la fleur de son âge, et d'un travail infatigable, d'ailleurs imbecile et timide, un antioche." Even more recently, in the *Journal of the History of Medicine*, Dr J. L. G. de la Roche, a French doctor, has written, "Un jeune homme de famille, âgé de 22 ans, s'étant livré jour et nuit à des études condamnées (et qui) tombe dans un délire qui devient bientôt phrénétique." These two, unfortunately, could have passed quite easily into a nineteenth-century context and might indeed have become the stuff

## Quoof

How often have I carried our family word  
For the hot water bottle  
To a strange bed  
As my father would juggle a red-hot half-brick  
In an old sock  
To his childhood settle  
I have taken it into so many lovely laids  
Or laid it between us like a supor

An hotel room in New York City  
With a girl who spoke hardly any English  
Who had on her breast  
Like the smouldering out-off spoor of the pet  
Or some other shy beast  
That has yet to enter the language

Paul Muldoon

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## to the editor

## Flaubert

Sir—Your reviewer Henry Chadwick (January 30) and others who do not already know this may be reassured to hear that the 1949 version of Flaubert's *Tentation* does not survive only in manuscript. It was first published in 1910, as an appendix to the Conard edition of the 1856 version, but since 1964 has also been in print, side by side with the two later versions. In the Seal edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*, among authorities who have disagreed with Bouillier's and Du Camp's domineering opinion of the first version are Bernard Masson and Professor Jean Brunaut.

A main reason why the historical Saint Antony was "not of the least importance" is that what interested Flaubert most was the parallel he discerned between the decadence of the third-century Alexandrian world and his own age.

HERMIA OLIVER.

25 Matham Road, East Molesey, Surrey.

## Scott and 'Castle Dangerous'

Sir—A. N. Wilson in his review of James Reid's book *Sir Walter Scott: Landscape and Locality* (January 30) is entitled to his views. It seems unfair, however, for him to begin by noting a factual mistake in Mr Reid's book and then to make one himself. I refer to the reviewer's sentence: "When he [Scott] did not know a landscape intimately, he took pains, as for example in *Ante de Geiristiu* or *Castle Dangerous*, to get it right."

*Castle Dangerous* is set at Castle Douglas in Galloway. It is the same region as the setting of *Guy Mannering*, which your reviewer concedes is "a key book" in understanding Scott's landscapes. I would allow that *Castle Dangerous* was written when Scott was a very sick man. Nevertheless, he tells us in the introduction that he returned to the area to examine Castle Douglas in detail and the scenes everywhere show lifelong familiarity. Indeed the opening chapter of the novel

discusses travelling in Scotland in general with this particular landscape as representative. Does your reviewer really mean Count Robert of Paris, written at the same time as *Castle Dangerous*, but set in a part of the world Scott would only know from books?

ALAN HINDLE.  
Department of Humanities, Ilkley College, Wells Road, Ilkley, West Yorkshire LS29 9RD.

## 'London Magazine'

Sir—*London Magazine* is faced with a substantial bill for legal costs in a settled defamation action not of its seeking. Its survival is doubtful if payment has to be made out of the magazine's resources.

*London Magazine* is the only monthly exclusively devoted to literature and the arts which carries original work by the best new and established writers. It has published many special issues devoted to different countries, and dealing with cinema, theatre, art, photography and music. Its closure would be a great loss to readers in this country and abroad, especially at this time of contraction in subsidies for the arts.

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CECIL PARROT  
VICTOR PASMORE  
HAROLD PINTER  
ANTHONY ROWELL  
STEPHEN SPENDER

## Mushrooms and Toadstools

Sir—Both Fairfax and Mout and Eric Korn are wrong about toadstools ("Romancers", January 30). Mycologists use "mushroom" and "toadstool" indiscriminately, neither being applied exclusively to either edible or poisonous fungi. "Poisonous toadstool" and "edible toadstool" are therefore proper, and indeed essential, terms. To add confusion, in the vocabulary of mycology and medicine "mushroom poisoning" is preferred to "toadstool poisoning".

With respect to Mr Korn's remark that "any mycologist worth his salt will agree", he is confusing us with mycophages. It is possible to be a mycologist and at the same time to dislike the taste of edible mushrooms and toadstools.

RODERIC OCKE.

Department of Botany, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN.

## Poetry Competitions

Sir—Recent comment on your poems about Poetry Competitions has had about it an all too common British dingoism. Anne Stevenson alone (Letters, January 30) sounded a positive note. But the too could not resist a last minute whine: "I'd like to endorse Douglas Dunn's suggestion that newspapers such as *The Observer* spend their money printing more poems throughout the year instead of lavishing an absurd amount on a single winner."

Did Anne Stevenson wonder, after the Arvon Foundation Poetry Competition? I bet she did. (As I bet, did many other equally good professional poets.) But if Anne Stevenson did enter and if she now wins the £5,000 *Observer* prize, will she immediately divide the prize among the less fortunate entrants? Or will she return the cash to *The Observer* with a stern admonition to publish poems every Sunday throughout the year? Let's congratulate the Arvon Foundation. *The Observer* and the

South Bank Show for getting together, with four of our best poets as judges, to stage such a daytime literary event. For those of us who do not like poetry competitions, stop entering—nobody expects you to take part—and let those of us who do like them urge the Arvon Foundation to organize another one as soon as possible. Such a competition assists and stimulates poetry in this country in a great number of levels. And, best of all, it does so with a compelling, joyous shout.

HUGH ADDISON.  
Upper Hagstock, Slindon, Hailfex BX3 6UJ.

## 'Monumenta Britannica'

Sir—I have no wish to add to the comments about the merits of the recent edition of John Aubrey's *Monumenta Britannica* (Letters, January 30).

Readers may be interested to learn, however, that Yale University Press and I hope it will be possible to publish a complete transcription of the *Monumenta* with translations of those sections in foreign languages and with annotated references to all the sites mentioned by Aubrey. Our intention is to publish it in a form which will be easily accessible to archaeologists, historians and all others interested in this valuable and fascinating work.

AUBREY BURL.  
40 St James Road, Edgworth, Birmingham B15 1JR.

## Sandymount and Sandycove

Sir—Dozing Eric Korn ("Romancers", January 30) has confused two of Dublin's several Martello Towers—the one where the Reverend H. B. was "with the lady" at Sandymount, while stately pump Buck Mulligan went through his motions on top of the one at Sandycove, a couple of miles to the south.

MARIANNE MAYES.  
2 Shanghaigh Terrace, Killinoy, co Dublin.

## 'Return to Oasis'

Sir—Your reviewer, Roger Bowen, of our book *Return to Oasis* (January 21), reproaches us for omitting Tiller, Spencer, Durrall, all citizens—from our service anthology of the Middle East in the Second World War. Let me assure him that we considered at length whether or not to include these civilian poets. In the end we were back to first principles. Why the book? And the answer remained the same as it had been for the original *Oasis* in Cairo in 1943. So much had been written by members of the forces, of all ranks, in a little way known or published. And, as the quote from G. R. Fraser, which Bowen reproduces, asserts, not only was there more poetry than from the Western Front in the First World War, but it was even finer. The problem has been to put this poetry to print. To produce *Return to Oasis* we set up a literary trust, "The Salamander Oasis", from those of us who had served and written in the Middle East.

In contrast to the civilian poets, most of the service poets had been born to bluish inns. Moreover, we could not accept the concept, advanced by your reviewer, of service and civilian writers sharing a common exile. In no way! Mr Bowen may not have served in the forces. If he had, he would have seen the difference between military and civilian life. A civilian can tear up his roots and move off when it suits him. A soldier goes where he is sent. Enforced exile? Not really, if we talk of civilians in Cairo in the Second World War, or of soldiers in the Middle East. It is a splendid thing to have all this gathered up before it is dispersed and lost, which would be a pity. I have nothing to praise.

It seems to be a matter of context, in various senses. "Blake can't draw figures", this is fair, and can make irritating an art which looks Michelangelo while its main concerns are gesture and physiognomy (in Blake, Manierist counterpoint figures showing both sides of the body remote malevolent energy—the artistic purposes of a Giambologna sculpture being taken as the aggressive purpose of its subject). "Blake's poetry is undisciplined", this is fair, and, given the certain claims to discipline and system expressed and implied by the writer himself, irritating also. It may not matter that the early sonnets press forward on the edge of the century path (retreated by Wordsworth and Keats) towards non-sensibility, but what happened to Blake's Bible of Hell, his "6 or 7 epic poems", his "20 tragedies"? Blake's projects were often more phantasmic, their existence at the mercy of a brushstroke through a numerical order, than those of writers who would assert their cosmology and history and their personae as completely consistent as a fool or a knave. No true friend of the poet would wish to outdo his claim about Jerusalem that "every word and letter is studied and put into its place".

THE PROSPECT OF SYSTEM IN Blake's writing has never been a compelling idea to his admirers—something that distorts the freedom of the unfettered. There have been too many fraudulences in the critical discussion of Innocence and Experience, for example, first-drawn schemes of contrast and connection that give an academic literary history as well as a bad name. And Blake's textual scholarship in this century has been characterized by an extraordinary effort at completeness. Every scrap of his surviving writing has been treated with an equal degree of attention. Keats's *Hyperion* and Standard Authors edition, unlike any comparable volume in the series, is *Writings not Poems*, and that means it includes marginalia, letters and preliminary drafts of poems. Admittedly, the ordinary distinction between printed and handwritten, published and unpublished text does not apply to Blake, and the line between verse and prose can be hard to draw. And Keats, whose terrific, loose and adventurous style captured and revitalized Blake in materialized this tradition, was a biographer rather than a believer in his instinct. The effect of the 300-odd miscellaneous pages is, nevertheless, that of a dossier in some enormous, frustrated antipathy of literary critical detective-work (they are also very serviceable as a Sibley reference).

More recently, the fine-tooth comb has been applied to Blake's poetry: worth and value is a more compelling line of work. To start with, all we have either MSS of or editions of Blake's poetry are, after all, two general have had to respect for identity at the expense of truthfulness: man's literary colleagues. And there is

Robert N. Essick: *William Blake Printmaker* 283pp, plus 236 illustrations Princeton University Press. £27.30. 0 19 81354 2

TAMARA DUNBAR: *William Blake's Illustrations to the Poetry of Milton* 207pp, Clarendon. £20. 0 19 81734 8

A lot of art historians and literary critics claim to dislike intensely, even to hate, the work of William Blake. Happily, most of them will also admit that they do not mean it; they would not, that is, press a button which annihilated Blake's pictorial work and writing. Not to have Blake would be to make English culture between 1780 and 1830 immeasurably poorer through the loss of certain figurative images, certain coloured plates and etchings, some lyrics and passages of rhapodic blank verse, a body of aphorisms, and, equally important, the example of his courageous, distressed and tender personality. If we cannot do without *Clod Dug*, the *Virgil* woodcuts, *The Sick Rose* and *The Mental Traveller*, the *Proverbs of Hell*, Plate 31 of *Milton*, and the letter of October 7, 1803, to Hayley, why do we cavil at their creator?

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## Image of disorderliness

By Michael Mason

Blake might have altered the text on the plate of a relief etching. Was this how "compulsion" became "compulsion" in *Milton* 4 of *Urizen*?

There are brilliant analyses of the colour of those plates, such as *The Song of Los*, Plate 8 (Huntington copy), which were partly printed in colour and partly in black. This is a topic which opens up some deep puzzles: why did Blake, in the mid-1790s, use colour printing for some of his literary illustrations and separate pictures, when the minute runs involved made this much more laborious than directly applying the colour? Is this an explanation, or is it psychological. As Tatham said, the method gave "a look of accident". In Blake, alongside the artist who spoke up for the "definite" against "blots" was also an artist whose principle was that of rupture, instantaneous, unthinking, uncalculating, and whose art was correspondingly disorderly and random. Sometimes he even used the "accident" of previously etched lines, as when the plate of *The Approach of Doom* was cannibalized for *Urizen*, Plate 2. It is a theme of Blake's that prismatic, generally, executed by Blake, allowed a variety of balance to be struck between discipline and freedom.

Essick is not the first to point out that Blake's use of colour printing in the verso has a fairly consistent association with postlapsarian subjects: being used sometimes for Experience, for instance, but never for Innocence. It explains the connexion more persuasively than anyone else has done, however, by working from a close description of the physical properties of the image, the branch of the colour that printing produces ("dandruff") is his happily chosen term.

Thus, the patterns of colour printing—like the images of fibres, roots, branches, veins, and nerves descriptive of fallen nature—have throughout Blake's poetry—have the same multiplicity of reference to geological, biological, and psychological forms found in the myth of the simultaneous evolution of the material universe, human body, and self-enclosed mental etas set forth in *The Book of Urizen* and *The Song of Los*.

Like the ingenuities of literary criticism have had a fruitful influence. With Keynes, collector's description and critic's interpretation were two different things, and it was felt a little impure or indecorous to mix them. It is a relief that this distinction is placed by someone who knows what he is

doing. Essick is also very good at applying interpretatively his special familiarity with reproductive processes and effects in the case of *Grand Day*, *Urizen*, and the most routine commercial techniques of hatching seem to be expressively contrasted with direct cutting on the plate.

I am not nearly so convinced that Blake's experience under Basire of illustrating architectural fragments, emblems and so forth, and of drawing tonus from different angles, had anything to do with the later metaphysics of "the bounding outline" and "the Tourdion Vision". And when Essick enters the churned up arena of Innocence and Experience there is a distinct residual influence, of a bad sort, from all those superb literary critical descriptions of the lyrics. It takes some nerve to disagree with Professor Essick, but I cannot see the Innocence plates as early experimental pieces of relief etching, which "contemporary connoisseurs" must have lumped "... together with catchwords" of previously etched lines, as when the plate of *The Approach of Doom* was cannibalized for *Urizen*, Plate 2. It is a theme of Blake's that prismatic, generally, executed by Blake, allowed a variety of balance to be struck between discipline and freedom.

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